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Adults and Higher Education: Bridging the Culture Gap

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Serving rural adult learners requires a basic and fundamental understanding of both the culture of adulthood and the culture of higher education. This paper explores a model for bridging the two cultures.

Adults and Higher Education: Bridging the Culture Gap

by Maurice Olivier

Adult learners are undoubtedly one of the most pervasive forces currently influencing and challenging the very fabric and structure of today's higher education enterprise. Few observers and critics of higher education today would contest the idea that this new group of students is clearly dedicated to lifelong learning through the nation's colleges and universities.

Increasingly, at scholarly and professional meetings and in mainstream publications, attention has focused on adaptations to allow institutions of higher education to serve the new constituency, particularly those adults pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate programs. An implicit assumption made by most institutions is that a more practical curriculum, more flexible degree requirements, and courses offered at more convenient times and in varied formats are the new institutional reforms needed to effectively serve the growing adult market.

But as Patricia Cross (1985) points out, the task in adapting institutions of higher education to serve the needs of the adult learner is more profound than simply changing the time when courses are offered.

> Educators should be thinking about more than new ways to deliver the standard curriculum, about more than convenient schedules and locations for new populations of learners, about more than increasing the accessibility of lifelong learning opportunities. Rather, it seems to me that the task is to reconceptualize the role of postsecondary education in the learning society. (Cross, 1985)

As many practitioners in adult higher education will attest, adapting college and university programs to accommodate the ever-increasing numbers of adult learners is no easy task. Serving the adult population raises very complex issues. Many of these issues, I believe, require more thoughtful and considered analysis and discussion than are currently taking place on the campus today.

This paper proposes that a new lens is required to provide a wider angle of vision in identifying and designing higher education's response to the adult learner. One way to re-examine our thinking about the changes that could and should be incorporated into higher education is to use the analogy of culture. From this new perspective, we can come to understand that we are essentially dealing with two different "cultures"—the "culture" of the university or college community and the "culture" of adulthood.

As institutions of higher education continue to wrestle with the questions of how program responses and institutional structures can be reshaped to serve the needs of the adult learner, more attention needs to be devoted to the careful and considered analysis of both cultures. The absence of any serious campus discussion concerning the fundamental differences between these two cultures will only perpetuate what I call "cultural gridlock" - an inability to move toward understanding each other.

A Point of Reference: Discovering the Importance of Culture

In 1978, I conducted a year-long study which examined the nature and characteristics of adulthood and the nature and characteristics of the college/university community. The purpose of this study was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the special aspects of serving adult learners, particularly in an off-campus setting. The study included a review, analysis, and synthesis of the history, events, and characteristics of both higher education and the adult population of New Hampshire beginning in the year 1636 and continuing through the early 1970s. In addition, over 100 interviews with adult learners, campus faculty and administrators were conducted.

One major outcome of this study was the recognition that serving adult learners, both on and off campus, requires a basic and fundamental understanding of both the culture of adulthood and the culture of a college/university community. These findings have been documented in a report titled "Future Directions and Emphasis: The Two 'States' We're In" (Olivier, 1978).[1]

This comparative historical analysis between higher education and adults clearly indicated that a major "cultural gap" exists. The cultural divide is perhaps at its greatest, when analyzing the culture of adulthood in the rural setting. Occasionally, rural adult learners and the higher education community have managed a frozen smile across the terrain. However, most campus initiatives to serve the educational needs of the rural adult learner have been focused on the issues of marketing and delivery of programs, leaving many needs unmet.

Colleges and universities are not designed to serve adults. They have been generally perceived as "a place where you get an education" during one stage of your life. For adults, learning is not a once-in-a-lifetime "investment" of time, money, and personal commitment. It becomes, by desire and necessity, a lifelong investment. Adults as students, because of varied and extremely diverse lifestyles are seemingly not compatible with the institution's purpose. Many faculty members, for example, find it difficult to teach adults, perceiving them to be incompatible in terms of academic preparation. Consider the following faculty response to the question: "Where does adult learning and life-

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long learning belong on this campus?"

> Nowhere, or if there must be one, keep it away from everything else—give it to the extension division. Then the rest of us can concentrate on our regular teaching and research and won't have to bother about that low-standard stuff.

Unfortunately, such a sentiment is still reflected in the attitudes of many faculty and campuses today.

Many of the questions and issues being raised today concerning higher education's response to the nation's adults run counter to the norms, values, traditions and assumptions widely held in academia. Simply stated, colleges and universities were not designed, organized and structured to serve adults. Despite long-standing and remarkable solo efforts of cooperative extension, continuing education divisions and other non-traditional programs, colleges and universities still lack the appropriate infrastructure to accommodate the needs of the lifelong learner in the learning society. According to Cross:

> The learning society calls for thinking about students as permanent members of an extended academic community. The concept of a continuing educational relationship with students is far more exciting than the old alumni relationships that depended heavily on loyalty and money. (1985)

To date, most institutional efforts have been aimed at increasing the learner's awareness of what is available on the campus through some fairly aggressive marketing strategies and techniques. Such efforts certainly position college and university programs in the minds of potential adult students, with the hope of increasing enrollments, but they fall short of creating an on-going and lasting educational relationship. In order to more fully understand the nature and scope of this cultural divide, we need to take a closer look at the characteristics of both cultures.

The Culture of the College/University Community

A college or university achieves its goals through creating an environment calculated to bring about change in people—what some have called "growth inducing climates." The environment of a college or university consists of several interrelated parts. It is an aggregation of land, buildings, equipment and supplies, and a population of students, faculty, staff, and governing boards. The physical plant and the people are what we see on a visit to a campus.

The unseen environment is a "culture." This culture consists, in part, of ways of doing things, and encompasses administrative organization, process and procedures, degree requirements, faculty committees, curricula, methods of instruction and research, decision-making processes, rules, politics, rewards, penalties, and work habits. The culture also includes the common values, expectations, standards, assumptions, traditions, general atmosphere, and the behavior patterns of the people involved.

Each institution selects those who will be admitted, those who will be allowed to remain, and those who will be given credits, degrees, and other credentials. Each institution also sets the terms on which instruction will be available by deciding on the programs to be offered, the academic schedule, the location at which instruction takes place, tuition and other fees, and student aid. Decisions on the matters determine which persons will be excluded from the higher educational system altogether.

The people in the culture are related in complex ways. For example, the students bring a unique set of interests and traits. Through such interplay, a student sub-culture evolves that becomes an influential source of change for all the individuals who are inducted into it. Thus, students are not only the objects of the educational process, but also an important part of the environment in which instruction takes place. Similarly, individual faculty and staff members bring to an institution their unique traits and interests. Individually and collectively, they create a sub-culture that influences their own members and also their students. The sum of the various sub-cultures, including the interactions among them, becomes the culture of a college or university community.

This culture, for the most part, has not changed dramatically over time. In fact, in "Three Thousand Futures: The Next Twenty Years in Higher Education," Clark Kerr and his staff discovered a fascinating fact:

> Taking as a starting point 1530, when the Lutheran Church was founded, some 66 institutions that existed then still exist today in the Western world in recognizable forms. These are the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the parliaments of Iceland and the Isle of Man, and 62 universities. Universities in the past have been remarkable for their historic continuity . . . and have come out less changed than almost any other segment of their societies.

Generally, institutions of higher education have deep-rooted traditions and conventions and hold to long established and cherished beliefs. Even in America, as Keller (1983) pointed out:

> Every college, school, or university has embedded in its tissues an intangible set of traditions, values, and hopes. Sometimes these are a fairly unified set of values . . . Some campuses have an "organizational saga," an institutional mythos, that dominates the place . . . An institution's traditions, values, and aspirations may no longer be in step with current realities and may be very difficult to maintain in the probable environment ahead.

The Culture of Adulthood

The culture of adulthood is equally complex. The ongoing roles and responsibilities adults have for families, work, careers, community service, and managing leisure activities are varied and, at times, very demanding. Today, more than ever, it is impossible to assume that adult lives follow an orderly, linear process. Actually, the process is circular. Careers are interrupted and started as individuals make loops in the age system. Examples of such loops would be a woman who becomes a college freshman at the age of 45 or a man who starts a new family at the age of 50. According to Nancy Schlossberg:

> People engage in renewal activities all through adulthood; for example, in a given class one might find three grandmothers ranging in age from 40 to 80. Being a grandmother today is not what it was in the past. Some are young and some are old; some are tired and some are fresh. What we are seeing is a demographic change where four- and five-generation families may be the norm; where one can be both a grandmother and a granddaughter simultaneously; where the fact that one is a grandmother, mother, or wife should not be the end of inquiry – it does not say anything about whether a person is ending or be-

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> ginning a career. Furthermore, one cannot always tell the difference between people who are 3 or 50—the dress is not that different; the hairstyle is not that different. Fifty- and 60-year-olds now wear jeans to class. (1984)

Another major characteristic of the adult learner population is the range, depth, and richness of experience and insight. As Frances Mahoney (1982) reported:

> A diversely prepared student population is one in which the mix of experience, motivation, ability, aspiration, and insight is constantly in flux. Personal issues faced by students are compounded by problems with children and spouse. Work schedules complicate academic patterns, but work experience adds to the quality of the insight and of the questions that students often bring to challenge the thinking of faculty and other students. Ethnic and social class differences function to create a sense of cognitive dissonance that leads students to examine some of their well-established beliefs and to adjust their thinking in the light of new or discrepant information.

"Transitions" seem to be the most normal state for the late 20th-century adult. In the past, the adult could sit quietly for a portrait; today's adult can barely be caught on fast speed film. As John Naisbitt (1982) put it, "These days, the only constant is change . . . from industrial to information age, from regional to world culture, from one education for one future to lifelong education for the constantly changing present . . . ." We experience what Patricia Cross calls "blended life-styles" in which a person does not necessarily follow a prescribed life course. Clearly, one major characteristic of the culture of the adult learner is its fluid lifespan. As Aslanian and Brickell (1980) found "over four-fifths of adult students cite some major transition in their lives as the primary cause for their return to college."

Within the rural setting, the culture of adulthood reflects some very distinctive characteristics. For example, rural adults typically share the reality of geographical isolation which, no doubt, limits the scope of options to support their learning needs: Traveling distances to a campus are usually prohibitive. Rural adults are also very pragmatic in their thoughts and actions; there is a need for immediacy of application. Rural adults also have a greater sense of self-reliance. The desire to solve their own problems is very much an inherent characteristic also highly cherished in the rural setting fosters sense of apprehension and occasional distrust of outsiders.

In general, both cultures can be summarized as follows: Colleges and universities represent an established structure (culture) characterized by expectations of student homogeneity in areas such as campus residency, full-time study, and life phase development. In contrast, the culture of adulthood is characterized by its heterogeneity in terms of life experiences, levels of knowledge, and degrees of motivation. The lifestyle of adults not only embraces diverse and ever-changing life circumstances but also the tremendous responsibility for family.

The Dual Learning Culture Model

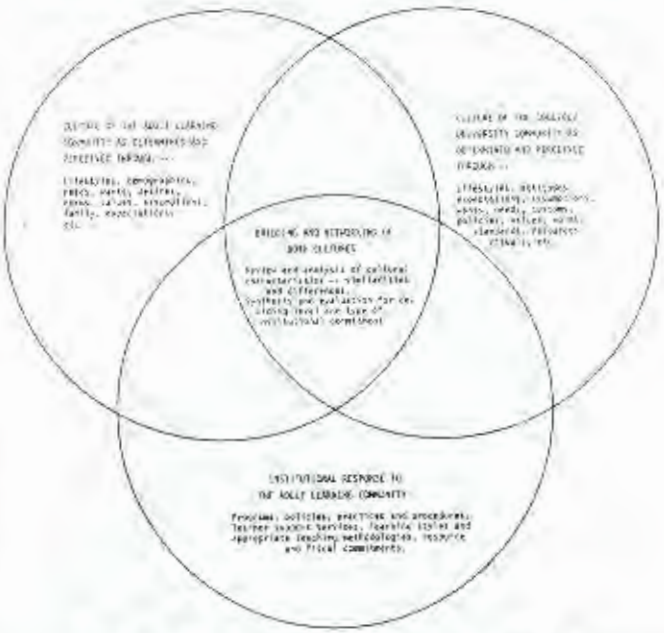
Following that year-long study and my own experiences in working with both cultures, a model was developed which, I believe, facilitates bridging both cultures: The Dual Learning Culture Model. This model provides a new lens which widens the scope of vision to more completely encompass the dynamic relationship between the two cultures. It helps identify and analyze dimensions and elements in each culture for the purpose of achieving compatible interests, shared understandings, and learning in community.

The Dual Learning Culture Model (Figure 1) was designed to be a comprehensive strategy for analyzing various aspects, dimensions and conditions within these two cultures. It was intended for use by professionals in the higher education community and also for some groups of adult learners. In organizational terms, the Dual Learning Culture Model utilizes six structural elements to help institutions of higher education successfully bridge two seemingly incompatible worlds. These are:

1. Situation and Trend Analysis Process
2. Leadership Development for Faculty and Administrative Staff
3. Curriculum Developments and Renewal
4. Learning Communities and Networks – Internal and external to the campus
5. Service Systems
6. Planning, Evaluation, and Institutional Commitment

All six elements are focused on bridging the two cultures. They represent organizing frameworks to facilitate discussion and action. It is not a linear model—bridging can occur through any one of these areas. However, the likelihood of establishing an infrastructure that supports a workable partnership between the adult learner and the college/university will be greatly increased when all six areas are functioning at some minimal level.

Figure 1: The Dual Learning Culture Analysis Model



Using the Model: Empowering the Rural Adult

Many campus attempts to serve adults are based upon implicit assumptions concerning teaching and learning, admission criteria and curriculum content and process. These assumptions, although not often made explicit, are frequently conveyed through the approaches and methods used in needs identification and program planning. Consequently, learning needs and interests of adults often remain

unmet or misunderstood by the campus community.

Within the rural setting we have come to understand that successful programs are those that are "owned" by that community. As was recently stated through a set of four regional conferences sponsored by The Action Agenda for Rural Adult Postsecondary Education (1985), on serving the rural adult learner:

> Some generalizations do emerge from the models most successful in meeting rural needs. Successful programs seem to literally grow out of the community itself. The link between purpose and product is tight, responding to specific need embraced by the community as a whole. Community members take an active role in shaping the programs developed and controlling the outside resources called upon. Community-based organizations or rural libraries are often successful because their origins lie deep in the communities they serve. But other providers - colleges, cooperative extension, rural development centers - can also be effective, once they join hands with the community as willing partners in the educational process. The programs most successful are the programs "owned" by the rural community.
>
> A second characteristic found among successful programs is that they respect cultural differences. At the very least, the program recognizes and respects the values and lifestyles of rural people.

One of the conceptual foundations which supports the Dual Learning Culture Model is the philosophical commitment to a process of empowering the people. This conceptual foundations was drawn from work completed in 1975 through a two-year FIPSE funded project which established six university-sponsored community learning centers (CLC). According to Robby Fried (1980), the CLC project director:

> The empowerment process is less a handing down of knowledge between the professional and the other people than a partnership, a mutual sharing of ideas, intuitions, and experiences. The power of empowerment involves a sharing, not a delivery, and that means reciprocity between facilitating professionals and the people they work among.

Central to the idea of empowerment is the belief that rural adults have the capacity to learn and solve their own problems. Citing the proceedings of the recent regional conferences:

> . . . successful programs respect adult autonomy. Programs that address the learner's expectations, that accommodate adult lifestyles and responsibilities, and that share control over content and method with the learners are more likely to be successful. They embrace the belief that adults inherently have the capacity to learn and solve their own problems - they need only the proper resources. (Proceedings, 1985).

How then, do colleges and universities go about finding the appropriate setting where mutual discussions concerning these issues can take place? One of the structural elements of the Dual Learning Culture Model is the Situation and Trend Analysis Process. This process engages members who represent both cultures in some discussion, assessment, and analysis toward facilitating a new understanding of each other. In short, it is a process which recognizes the importance of shared learning and it empowers the community with the rights of ownership.

This process is summarized to serve as an illustration of how one of the six structures can be employed in a real life setting. Other settings might call for one or more of the other frameworks.

The Situation and Trend Analysis Process: Toward Mutual Understanding and Community Ownership

The Situation and Trend Analysis Process is not a needs survey. It is a six-step process which engages appropriate groups and individuals from both cultures for the purpose of:

a. determining ways in which adult learning needs and interests and institutional resources can be meshed in a viable and vital program.
b. establishing an on-going dialogue and network within both communities which can facilitate a greater mutual understanding.
c. providing a framework which makes community ownership and shared learning possible.

STEP ONE: Establishing Collaborative Assessment and Planning Group: This core group is comprised of 12 to 20 people, including community members, members of civic groups, potential learners, faculty, deans, and other academic administrative staff. This group assumes responsibility for reviewing and discussing dimensions and characteristics of the various campus and adult communities chosen for assessment and analysis. It also assumes responsibility for two types of information: (1) demographic information, and (2) anecdotal information including perceptions of the communities involved.

STEP TWO: Determining the Current Situations and Trends: This step is focused on determining existing situations within each of the respective communities being analyzed. The Collaborative Assessment and Planning Group reviews and shares information and perceptions concerning the communities involved. A tentative plan of action is proposed for conducting the community interviews.

STEP THREE: Conducting the Community Interviews: Members of the Collaborative Assessment and Planning Group identify 60 to 100 community leaders and citizens who might be interested in participating in one-half hour interviews. Interviews are conducted by members of the core group at a variety of locations within the community over a three-day period. Team members are paired to conduct the interview with community members. During these interviews, no questionnaire is completed; rather the interview focuses on a set of probing questions. This interview process provides not only learning needs and interests, but also the conditions and situations under which learning should be organized.

STEP FOUR: Interpreting and Translating: The Collaborative Assessment and Planning Group is then charged with preparing a summary report to include their individual observations and perceptions—What did you see? What did you hear? What did you learn? A preliminary program response is developed. The planning group agrees on what appropriate resources will be required.

STEP FIVE: Reviewing the Initial Program Response with Community Members - the "Open Houses": Based upon their preliminary report, team members organize feedback sessions - "open houses." At these "open houses" the initial program response is presented to members of the

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community who participated in the interview process. Members of the planning group facilitate the review and discussion of the group report. Two types of information are distributed at this meeting: a summary of the team's observations and perceptions of the culture of the community, and the one-year program response which is discussed in a small group format. These groups report on whether the program response is indeed appropriate and in line with community and learner interests and needs. Community members are then asked to volunteer as community resources to facilitate program implementation. Many community members will volunteer to serve as faculty, as program coordinators, and as advisors to the planning group.

STEP SIX: Networking: Once consensus has been reached by all parties and groups involved, program implementation needs to be followed by the establishment of an informal network of citizens, participants, and other community members to assist in monitoring and evaluating program effectiveness.

This Situation and Trend Analysis Process was carried out by the School for Lifelong Learning at least a dozen times in New Hamphire over the past six years. The result of this process has been significant. Between 1972 and 1978, 78 students were able to complete associate and baccalaureate programs in the northern portion of the state. Subsequently, activity resulting from the Situation and Trend Analysis Process (carried out in 1980) has allowed 380 rural adults to complete the requirements for associate's and bachelor's degrees. Three regional offices were also established which fostered, in a very tangible way, the working partnership between the university community and the rural adult learner. In addition, the Situation and Trend Analysis Process was vital in initiating a series of discussions and conferences on issues associated with economic development in northern New Hampshire.

Some Reflections

The Dual Learning Culture Model provides us with the framework to capitalize on the natural community of interest between colleges and universities and the adult population. It is a bold approach, based on the idea that some of the best and most productive innovations are also the simplest and most obvious. The purely rational and linear model of needs assessment, program planning, marketing, and delivery is valuable but not sufficient. Attention also needs to be paid to the direct involvement of the institution in experiencing the culture of the adult, to face-to-face meetings in local communities, and most of all, to creating a cauldron and letting it bubble.

Lastly, this paper has aimed at being a modest proposal but it contains a potentially radical element. There is a sense in which adult learning is a frontier of higher education. It affords a perspective for the re-evaluation of more traditionally oriented higher education. One of the great benefits of exploring this frontier is that many of the outcomes may find a wider application in colleges and universities across the country.

Footnotes

1. This report served to set in motion a five-year action agenda for the school for Lifelong Learning of the University System of New Hampshire. It helped initiate a major institutional transformation from an organization whose mode of operation was delivery - deliver a course, deliver a program, deliver a faculty member - to one committed to bridging the cultural divide between adults and higher education. A new framework within the institution evolved to embrace such concepts as compatible interests, shared learning, empowerment, and membership and association. These concepts served as the guiding principles in reshaping the institution's mission and learning philosophy.

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